



Philadelphia Youth Network

Policy Brief #2, Revised September 2008

Career-Connected Education

The Value of Workplace Exposure and Career-Connected Education for Low-Income Teens

All of today's young people need a rigorous academic program that prepares them for college and career success. But a growing body of research also suggests that low-income, high-risk teens who have opportunities to gain work experience and to connect education and work during high school are likely to do better in school and earn more throughout their lifetimes. The bad news is that opportunities for work and work experience are far less available to low-income urban youth than to young people who live in more affluent suburbs. Therefore, there is a clear and compelling case for public officials, school leaders and private employers to increase the numbers of these potentially life-changing experiences available to young people in Philadelphia.

Research findings on Career-Connected Education and Work Experience

Research points to several potential benefits of career-connected education and work-based learning during high schools years. For example:

- On average, students of all types – including those who are disabled, educationally or economically disadvantaged, and both male and female – earn about \$450 more annually for each high school CTE course they take. Furthermore, CTE students who also take a rigorous academic curriculum earn more than similar students who complete either the academic or the CTE curriculum alone.¹
- At-risk students who participated in High School Academies were more likely to stay through the 12th grade, show improved attendance and increase credit accumulation toward graduation. Furthermore, Career Academies produced sustained earnings gains that averaged 11 percent (or \$2,088) more per year for Academy group members than for individuals in the non-Academy group - a \$16,704 boost in total earnings over the eight years of follow-up. Impacts were particularly strong for young men, whose real earnings increased by \$3,731 (17 percent) per year - or nearly \$30,000 over eight years.²
- At-risk teens participating in paid internships after school missed fewer days of school than similar classmates, and those who participated at the highest levels tended to fail fewer core academic courses and had higher rates of graduation and lower dropout rates than similar students who were not in the program.³
- Structured employer-school connections provide a context that gives meaning to academics, and can promote positive youth development by providing students an introduction to the adult world, enabling them to build positive relationships with adults and gain access to employment networks, reduce the negative influence of peers and see more positive futures for themselves.⁴
- Students who participate in a high school work-based learning activities achieve at the four-year postsecondary level as well or better than students who do not participate in these activities. Furthermore, almost three-quarters of all postsecondary students believed they learn better through hands-on projects — the type of learning that occurs in work-based learning activities— than traditional, lecture-style practice.⁵

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Types of Career-Connected Education and Youth Work Experience

Career and Technical Education (CTE):

an approved body of courses and experiences that include both academic and occupational skills development, designed to equip students with skills needed for employment and postsecondary education/training in a particular field of employment

Career Academy:

a small learning community that features academic and technical curricula connected to a career theme, designed to promote high school graduation and postsecondary participation, but not necessarily focused on providing job-specific skills

Work-Based Learning:

a contextual, experience-based strategy for high school students designed to enhance the traditional goals of education, including academic achievement, meaningful careers and citizenship

Non-School Employment:

jobs outside the school that may or may not be related to school curricula but which provide important opportunities to gain work experience

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- Sixteen and seventeen year-old African Americans and Hispanics who worked moderate amounts per week were significantly more likely to have at least some college by the age of 30 than peers who did not.⁶ Furthermore, there is a large and positive correlation between work during high school and earnings for at-risk youth 8-11 years later.⁷

In summary, career-connected education and work experience during high school yield demonstrable, positive earnings impacts for at-risk youth, particularly males, and also have the potential to positively impact a range of school factors for low-income students.

However, despite the potential of work experience to promote future positive workplace outcomes, teens in low-income families have the least access to employment opportunities, especially jobs that are geographically convenient enough to allow combining part-time work and school.⁸ Furthermore, young African Americans begin to fall behind young whites in the accumulation of work experience at very early ages, which contributes to slower wage growth over time.⁹

Career-Connected Education and Work-Based Learning *in Philadelphia*

Students in the School District of Philadelphia currently have access to several types of career-connected education and work-based learning opportunities. Among the largest initiatives is **WorkReady Philadelphia**, the City's system for youth workforce preparation, which offers opportunities for almost 10,000 youth each year to participate in high-quality work-related experiences. Overseen by the Philadelphia Youth Network which contracts with dozens of youth-serving organizations on behalf of the Philadelphia Youth Council, WorkReady programs are supported by federal and state grants, foundation contributions, school district dollars and private sector investments. While WorkReady Philadelphia is recognized nationally as a model for the organization of youth workforce programming, each year at least 3,000 young people are turned away because funding is not available to support placements.

Philadelphia Academies, Inc. currently enrolls approximately 8,000 students in seventeen high schools and two middle schools, offering fourteen career fields designed to motivate young people to stay in school, provide them with marketable skills and access to employment. While research documents the continued on next page

successes of the Academies approach, their benefits are available to only a small fraction of students. Furthermore, the employer connections and career exploration offered by the Academies model could and should have significantly broader reach and influence on school organization and educational programming.

Philadelphia operates eight full-time **Career and Technical Education (CTE) high schools**: Bok, Communications Tech (formerly Bartram Communications), Dobbins, Edison High School/Fareira Skills Center, Mastbaum, Randolph Career Center, Saul Agricultural School and Swenson Arts and Technology High School. About 4,700 students, roughly 10% of Philadelphia's total high school

enrollment, attend these schools.

In addition to the full-time CTE schools, historically several different types of career-technical programs have been offered in a number of neighborhood high schools. However, due to the more stringent program requirements recently adopted by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, many of these programs are in the process of being phased out because they cannot meet state standards. Efforts to improve CTE will be strengthened through ongoing work supported by the Knight Foundation, which will produce recommendations to increase rigor and results for CTE students and programs in Philadelphia and across the Commonwealth.

What Needs to Be Done

The benefits of high-quality career-connected education and work-based learning are clear. And while a number of Philadelphia students have access to different types of excellent programs, far too many do not.

To address this gap, we need a new four-part strategy that features concerted and sustained efforts by elected officials, school district leaders and key employers to:

1. Boost significantly the numbers of high-quality workplace internships for high school students.
2. Extend the benefits of effective career-connected education and work preparation, to schools and students in all Philadelphia high schools as an integral part of high school reform.
3. Significantly increase the quality and quantity of career and technical programs, particularly in the region's high-priority occupations.
4. Create sophisticated new partnerships between the schools and employers that create pipeline programs for youth in high-wage/high-demand regional industries.

Bottom Line

Research reinforces what we understand intuitively to be true: that education connected to careers and opportunities for high-quality work experience improves the chances that young people will become productive, engaged and self-sufficient adults. We have the infrastructure in place to build these opportunities. All we need is the courage, leadership and will to make them available for our young people.

End Notes

- 1 Silverberg, Marsha, et al. (2004). *National Assessment of Vocational Education: Final Report to Congress*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Undersecretary.
- 2 Kemple, James and Willner, Cynthia J. (2008). *Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment and Transition to Adulthood*. New York: MDRC.
- 3 Goerge, Robert et. al. (2007). *After School Programs and Academic Impact: A Study of Chicago's After School Matters*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.
- 4 Lerman, Robert (1996). *Helping Disconnected Youth by Improving Linkages Between High School and Careers*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- 5 Swail, W.S. and Kampits, E. (2004). *Work-Based Learning and Higher Education: A Research Perspective*. Washington, DC: Educational Policy Institute, Inc.
- 6 Rothstein, R. (2000). "Youth Employment During School: Results from Two Longitudinal Studies." *Monthly Labor Review*.
- 7 Chapin, Duncan, Hannaway, J. (1996). *High School Employment: Meaningful Connections for At-Risk Youth*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- 8 Lerman, Robert (2000). *Are Teens in Low-Income and Welfare Families Working Too Much?* Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- 9 Holzer, Harry (2000). *Career Advancement Prospects and Strategies for Low-Wage Minority Workers*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.



The Philadelphia Youth Network's vision is that all our city's young people take their rightful places as full and contributing members of a world-class workforce for the region. We're pursuing this vision by making connections between individuals, organizations and systems to provide the preparation needed for our City's youth to thrive in a regional and global economy.